

Congressman Mike Pence kept a log of his daily activities during his recent visit to Iraq. The following notes are taken directly from this log:

Washington, Mar 2, 2004 - Notes from Iraq

By Congressman Mike Pence

Baghdad, Iraq

Basra, Iraq

On the morning of February 28, 2004, our small congressional delegation, led by Rep. Dan Burton, departed the modernity of Kuwait City in the belly of an Air Force C-130 and landed on the tarmac of Basra airport. We were the first American congressmen to visit Basra since the British liberated it from Saddam Hussein in April of 2003. The contrast between Kuwait City and Basra was startling. A decade after being liberated from the armies of Iraq, Kuwait City is like a bustling western metropolis nestled on the scenic coast of the Persian Gulf. Basra, by contrast, looks like a third-world country, ravaged not so much by war as by 30 years of the greed and cruelty that Saddam Hussein inflicted on the Shiite population of this region.

We traveled by motorcade through this ravaged city of one-story sandstone homes and arrived at the Coalition Provisional Authority headquarters. After a briefing from the British commander, we spent the balance of the day with local Iraqi leaders and ordinary civilians working to make the dream of democracy a reality.

During our meeting with the top civil and religious leaders of Basra, I asked what they thought of our action to remove Saddam Hussein. What had been a cool, if not distant, atmosphere suddenly erupted in a flourish of candor and passion. A local Muslim leader whose dress and appearance gave him an ancient air, said icily, "Saddam Hussein was a nightmare." Another said, "with Saddam's fall, it was as though a dark curtain had been lifted from Iraq and daylight could now shine in on our people." They spoke of the challenges of crime and foreign influences in their transition to democracy. And they spoke with affection for one another, Shiite Muslim and Christian, and the long history of religious tolerance in their community.

Later we met with a large group of ordinary citizens who were eager to speak to American officials about the war and the transition to democracy. The opinions around the lunch table of some twenty men and women were diverse and, at times, quite pointed. I later quipped that given the strong opinions in the room, I thought I was back on Capitol Hill! After decades of being silenced, particularly as Shiite Muslims, these people were ready to be heard. Lastly, we visited the Democracy Project in which USAID conducts classroom courses across the city for ordinary Iraqis in the basics of freedom and democracy. I was deeply moved when I was presented with poetry and essays on freedom by men and women who handed me their work with the innocent enthusiasm of grade school children. I told them they were like the founding fathers of America. I said, from my heart, "I envy you for being a part of your nation's founding,"

and they giggled with delight at the comparison to colonial Americans.

As we lifted off from Basra airport in a Chinook military helicopter, the city looked different than when we arrived. Before, I saw only Basra's buildings in ruin. As I left, I saw that their desire for democracy and hope for the future meant the foundations of Basra are strong and I believed that, with our help, her good people would rebuild this fair city greater than she had ever been.

Tillil Air Base, Southern Iraq

After a harrowing, low-altitude, high-speed helicopter flight across the Iraqi landscape, we landed like a feather on the runway at Tillil Air Base. Tillil is a coalition military base in south central Iraq with thousands of soldiers amidst a sea of military hardware and tents. It is a region of enormous historical significance. On a nearby hill are the actual ruins of the birthplace of Abraham, the region that was known 5,000 years ago as Ur of the Chaldeans and it is marked by a monument dating to 2100 B.C.

I was greeted on the tarmac by a young lieutenant from Schererville, Indiana named Erica Wright. Lt. Wright had just arrived in Iraq days earlier but already seemed a seasoned veteran on the base and her pride and enthusiasm impressed our entire delegation. At dinner in the mess hall, we met Maj. Alejandro Pontaoe, Jr. of Evansville, Tech. Sgt. Brian Lyles of Greenwood and Maj. Bill Mann of Mt. Vernon, Indiana. The men looked well, but emanated a seriousness and purpose well beyond their years. I told the men that the people of Indiana were proud and grateful for them and praying for their safe return. These men and women are on freedom's frontier in the war on terror, they know it and are up to the task.

Baghdad, Iraq

Day two began with our group strapped again in the cargo hold of a C-130 bound for Baghdad. Our aircraft was filled with soldiers returning from leave and several brave men and women arriving in this war zone for the first time. As our plane approached the Baghdad airport, we endured a series of abrupt turns designed to avoid potential enemy fire.

We landed on the tarmac of Baghdad International Airport and were greeted by a motorcade of military vehicles that carried us to the Coalition Provisional Authority Headquarters, which used to be the palace of Saddam Hussein. With our extensive escort, we made our way through the streets of Baghdad, whose typical urban landscape is punctuated by roadblocks and government buildings devastated by the "shock and awe" air assault of the first days of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Upon arriving in the "Green Zone," one begins to get a sense of the narcissism and self-indulgence of the Iraqi dictator. Huge palaces for family members and his primary residence with the dimensions of the French Lick Resort present a far different image of life for Iraq's elites than was on display in Basra a day earlier.

We were greeted by the commander of coalition forces in Iraq and his senior staff. Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez provided our group with classified information on the progress of the war and

the nature of the enemy tactics. We also received briefings on intelligence and economic development prior to our meeting with the leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Ambassador Paul Bremer.

This was a historic weekend for Iraq and Ambassador Paul Bremer. He literally left a meeting with members of Iraqi Governing Council, where the final draft of the new Iraq Constitution was being drafted, to update us on its progress. Ambassador Bremer is a humble and disarmingly pleasant man. Wearing a business suit and military boots, he bears the appearance of a diplomat and a soldier, which is precisely what he is. As he sat for our brief meeting, I noted that the papers he laid on the desk had captions like "Article IV" and "Article V." This was the draft of the new Iraqi Constitution on the coffee table in front of me! It was like having coffee with James Madison across the street from the Philadelphia Statehouse in the summer of 1787. This was the history of the new free Iraq in the making and we were chatting with the American at the center of that process.

Our final meeting of the day was with four Iraqi men involved in the investigation of political prisoners during the regime of Saddam Hussein. The leader of the group was jailed and released because of his suspected 'lack of loyalty' over a dozen times in twenty years. He spoke of the physical and mental torture routinely used by Hussein and his secret police against prisoners and members of their families. He spoke of more than 1 million Iraqis who remain missing after the thirty-year reign of Saddam Hussein and he spoke of the bodies of more than 400,000 Iraqis that had been located in nearly 300 mass graves. When I asked him what the fate of Saddam Hussein should be, he remarkably replied, "Saddam Hussein is nothing, his death would mean nothing. But before he goes to hell, we must use him to bring knowledge and relief for the families of the lost." As I saw the day before, Iraqis are a noble people of uncommon virtue.

Camp Victory, Baghdad, Iraq

After our official meetings, we headed to Camp Victory, the central military installation for U.S. troops in Baghdad. As happened the night before, we met scores of Hoosiers in uniform, eager for news from home and the handclasp of a grateful citizen. I sat with Pfc. Michael Favors, a sturdy and confident young soldier from Muncie, Indiana. Not long ago, Pfc. Favors and I met when he was a student at Muncie Southside High School and now here he was in the United States Army on the front lines of the war on terrorism. When I left Michael, I promised I'd call his mom, Debra Brower, and tell her how good he looked and how proud we all were of his service here in Iraq. He shyly replied, "It's an honor, sir." I replied, "Michael, the honor is all mine."

Our day ended in reflection on the true price of freedom. As we waited in the darkness of the runway at Baghdad airport, the remains of an Estonian soldier killed in action were solemnly placed aboard our aircraft amidst a quiet tribute attended by scores of American soldiers. As we unloaded the remains off the aircraft in Kuwait, the soldiers who sat with us in the cargo bay of the C-130 stood at attention and gently bore their fallen comrade down the ramp on his sad journey home to a family and nation mourning his loss. It is written, 'no greater love has a man

than this, that he should lay down his life for his friends.' This soldier from Estonia went home surrounded by friends.

So ended my brief excursion to Iraq, where heroes and the future of the Middle East are being forged every day. And while there is much work left to be done, after seeing firsthand the challenges and opportunities for the Iraqi people, I am more confident than ever in the justness of our cause. I remain confident that if we will demonstrate the idealism and perseverance that I witnessed among the men and women serving in our armed forces, our allies and the good people of Iraq, we will not fail.

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